

Freedom of the Press

The space for independent voices and diversity of opinion in traditional media grew even narrower in 2013, as the government penalized journalists for failing to conform to its increasingly strict definition of legitimate views and expanded its control over the broadcast and print sectors. The government of President Vladimir Putin has also begun to use a combination of the law, the courts, and regulatory action to crack down on online media, which some print journalists and bloggers, as well as new radio and television broadcasters, have used to reach audiences interested in alternative and more balanced sources of information. Despite this new government pressure, social media and web broadcasters continued to play an important role in fostering a wider debate about issues of public interest in 2013.

Although the constitution provides for freedoms of speech and of the press, politicians and government officials frequently use the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass the few remaining independent journalists who criticize widespread abuses by the authorities. Russian law contains a broad definition of extremism that officials invoke to silence government critics, including journalists; the enforcement of this and other restrictive legal provisions has encouraged self-censorship. Defamation was recriminalized in 2012. In 2013, prosecutors charged a number of individuals—including journalists, bloggers, ordinary citizens, and whistle-blowing civil servants—with defamation, extremism, and other trumped-up offenses in an effort to limit their activities. In July, a court sentenced anticorruption blogger and opposition leader Aleksey Navalny to five years in prison on embezzlement charges that were widely seen as spurious. Although an appeals court suspended his sentence in October, new, similar charges were filed against him soon thereafter. Also in July, Aksana Panova, former editor in chief of the respected independent news website Ura.ru in the city of Yekaterinburg, went on trial for alleged crimes including extortion, embezzlement, and money laundering. She pleaded guilty to a tax offense, but claimed that the other charges had been filed in retribution for critical reports about regional officials. A verdict was pending at year's end. Separately, in December a court in Moscow found the opposition weekly *New Times* and journalist Zoya Svetova guilty of libel for an article alleging that two Moscow judges had plagiarized their academic dissertations. The magazine was compelled to pay 500,000 rubles (\$15,500) in damages to each judge, and Svetova was fined \$3,000. The ruling was being appealed at year's end.

A criminal code amendment that came into effect in November 2012 authorized the creation of a federal register of blacklisted websites and appointed the state telecommunications regulator, Roskomnadzor, as its administrator. The measure—ostensibly aimed at protecting children from harmful information—has resulted in the blocking of thousands of websites. In December 2013, Putin signed a law that expanded the types of websites that could be blocked to include those that allegedly promote “extremist” information or “mass public events that are conducted in violation of appropriate procedures,” meaning unsanctioned protests. The law is only one of a number of tools used by courts to punish online speech in 2013. In June, the state-owned internet service provider (ISP) Rostelekom blocked several news websites, including the independent site Gazeta.ru, after a court in Ulyanovsk ruled that they had “propagated corruption” through articles on the subject. In its ruling, the court did not specify what laws the websites were alleged to have broken or name the articles in question.

In October, a law forbidding the media from using obscene language was employed in an attempt to close Rosbalt Information Agency, one of Russia's largest online news portals. Roskomnadzor applied to the Moscow City Court to have Rosbalt's license invalidated after it posted allegedly obscene third-party

content from YouTube, including footage of a performance by the antigovernment group Pussy Riot. Rosbalt had removed the content once concerns were raised, but the court nevertheless ruled against it in late October. The news agency was appealing the ruling, and the site continued to operate through the end of the year.

In June 2013, two new laws limiting freedom of expression and potentially press freedom came into force: a controversial law banning the dissemination of material that promotes “nontraditional sexual relationships” to minors and an antiblasphemy law that assigns prison terms and high fines for offending religious beliefs in public. In November 2013, *Molodoy Dalnevostoknik*, a newspaper in the Khabarovsk region, was reportedly investigated after it published a story about the dismissal of a local teacher and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights activist. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year. Also in June, the parliament debated a proposal to criminalize speech that negatively portrays the role of the Soviet army during World War II, prompting Dunja Mijatović, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representative for freedom of the media, to express her concerns about the initiative in a public statement. The Russian authorities rejected Mijatović’s criticism and called on the OSCE representative to stop interfering with the lawmaking process in Russia. The bill was still under consideration at the end of the year.

While the constitution and a 2009 law provide for freedom of information, accessing information related to government bodies or via government websites is extremely difficult in practice. However, a December 2012 resolution by the Supreme Court declared that denying journalists access to court proceedings in any but exceptional circumstances constituted an unacceptable obstruction to the work of a free media. Mijatović welcomed the court’s recognition of the principle of openness in court proceedings.

The government stepped up controls on civil society in 2013, using a 2012 law requiring nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding and engage in broadly defined “political activity” to register with the Justice Ministry as “foreign agents.” Law enforcement agencies carried out unannounced inspections of hundreds of groups, and often showed up with representatives from as many as a dozen different agencies—including fire inspectors, tax inspectors, and health and safety inspectors—to issue citations. The targeted NGOs included respected media support groups such as the Mass Media Defence Centre in Voronezh; Civil Control, the Institute of Regional Press, and the Foundation for Freedom of Information in St. Petersburg; and the Institute for Development of Press (Siberia) in Novosibirsk.

The government sets editorial policy at state-run television stations, which dominate the media sector. The country’s more than 400 daily newspapers offer content for a wide range of interests but rarely challenge the Kremlin line on important issues such as corruption or ongoing tensions in the North Caucasus. Meaningful political debate is mostly limited to weekly magazines, news websites, some radio programs, and a handful of newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* or *Vedomosti*, all of which are aimed at urban, educated, and relatively well-off Russians. Although these independent outlets are tolerated to some extent, the main national news agenda is firmly controlled by the Kremlin. There is little understanding of the media’s role as a check on the state or champion of the public interest in Russia.

In December, Putin abruptly abolished one of Russia’s oldest news agencies, RIA Novosti, declaring that it would be absorbed into the state-run media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today). RIA’s director was replaced by the ultraconservative and progovernment television commentator Dmitriy Kiselyov and Margarita Simonyan, the head of RT, the Kremlin’s international television network. The move was described by RIA Novosti in a post on its website as “the latest in a series of shifts in Russia’s news landscape, which appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily regulated media sector.”

Also in December, Russia refused to renew the visa of U.S. journalist David Satter—a veteran Russia reporter and longtime critic of the Kremlin, and currently an adviser for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—

marking the first time Russia had denied entry to an American journalist since the end of the Cold War. Satter, after traveling to Ukraine to renew his visa, was informed that his presence in Russia was “not desirable.” There were several other instances in 2013 of harassment of foreign journalists as they attempted to cover sensitive topics. In October, Dutch photojournalist Rob Hornstra was denied a Russian visa in what he believed to be a bid to obstruct critical reporting ahead of the Sochi Olympics. Hornstra had been documenting ongoing human rights abuses in the restive North Caucasus region and in Sochi in the lead-up to the 2014 Winter Games. Later the same month, a crew from Norway’s TV2 television station was harassed, detained, and questioned on multiple occasions over their coverage of preparations for the games. In one instance, an official threatened to jail one of the journalists. Separately, two journalists on board a Greenpeace vessel that was intercepted in Russian waters in September were taken into custody along with the environmental activists. The group had been engaged in a protest against Russian oil production in the Arctic. The two journalists, Russian photographer Denis Sinyakov and British freelance videographer Kieron Bryan, were arrested on piracy charges—later downgraded to the lesser offense of hooliganism—and held for more than two months before being released on bail. Bryan was finally granted permission to return to Britain in December.

Two journalists died as a result in their work in 2013, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). In July, Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev, deputy editor of the independent weekly *Novoye Delo*, was shot and killed outside his home in Dagestan. Akhmednabiyev, who was also a contributor to the online news site *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, often wrote about sensitive topics, including local corruption and human rights abuses by security officials. He had been receiving death threats since his name appeared on a hit list that was widely distributed in Dagestan in 2009, and he narrowly escaped an attempt on his life in January. In April, former *Khimskaya Pravda* editor Mikhail Beketov died as an indirect result of injuries he sustained during an attack in 2008 that left him paralyzed and unable to speak. His attackers have never been found. Beketov was beaten with metal rods, lost a leg and several fingers, and had shards of his skull embedded in his brain. The attack followed a campaign of harassment over articles he published that were critical of a controversial road project through a forest in Khimki, outside Moscow.

There were a number of reports of physical assaults against journalists and media outlets in 2013. In February, Viktor Nedosvetey, editor of the regional newspaper *Nepravilnaya Gazeta* in the northwestern Nenets Autonomous District, was attacked outside his home by three unidentified assailants. Nedosvetey was a vocal critic, through his paper, of abuse of power by local officials and the regional governor. In April, journalists Andrey Chelnokov and Boris Komarov suffered brutal beatings in separate attacks in Novosibirsk. Chelnokov, head of the Novosibirsk Journalists’ Union, was missing for 10 days before he was found; he suffered a concussion, a broken nose, and broken ribs. Komarov, president of Uniton-Media, which owns several outlets, was hospitalized for more than a month with injuries that included a concussion and a broken jaw. In October in Rostov-on-Don, investigative journalist and blogger Sergey Reznik was viciously beaten with baseball bats and shot at by two assailants. He sustained head and neck injuries in the attack, but was not hit by the gunshots. The following month he was sentenced to 18 months in prison on charges of insulting a public official, bribery, and deliberately misleading the authorities. Reznik regularly reports on corruption and abuses by local and regional officials.

The Moscow-based newspaper *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* was the target of a number of attacks in 2013. In March, member of parliament Andrey Isayev publicly threatened an editor and journalist on his Twitter account after the paper published a piece that criticized three female opposition members who had switched allegiances to join the ruling United Russia party. Isayev, who also belongs to United Russia, posted a tweet saying that “a severe retaliation” awaited “a particular editor and author” over what he called a “filthy, mean dirty attack.” Although Isayev did not name the reporter or editor in his post, he identified the article and the newspaper. The popular daily also had its offices attacked with incendiary devices twice during the year, in July and October. No one was seriously hurt in either attack, but the incidents followed what *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* owner Pavel Gusev called a smear campaign against

him by progovernment media, which had alleged his involvement in a prostitution ring.

Impunity for those who commit violence against journalists is a serious and long-standing problem. CPJ estimates that 56 journalists were killed in Russia between 1992 and the end of 2013; only 3 percent of those cases have been solved to date. The retrial of several suspects accused in the October 2006 murder of prominent investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya was postponed at least six times in 2013 following disputes over jury selection, accusations of witness bribing, and medical quarantine of one of the defendants. The proceedings had made little progress as of year's end. There was progress in the case of Igor Domnikov, a *Novaya Gazeta* reporter killed in 2000 in a brutal attack that was believed to be linked to his investigations into corruption and nepotism in Lipetsk. In 2007, gang leader Eduard Tagiryanov was sentenced to life in prison for carrying out the attack, and four other gang members received lengthy sentences. In May 2013, authorities in Moscow arrested businessman Pavel Sopot, accusing him arranging the attack on behalf of the then deputy governor of Lipetsk, Sergey Dorovskoy. In October, Tagiryanov recanted testimony that Sopot had ordered the attack, but testimony from other convicted gang members helped lead to Sopot's conviction in December. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and ordered to pay 1 million rubles (\$30,000) to Domnikov's widow.

The authorities exert significant influence over the information landscape through a vast state-owned media empire. The state owns, either directly or through proxies—including Gazprom Media, an arm of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom; and National Media Group, owned by Yuriy Kovalchuk, a close ally of Putin and board chairman of Rossiya Bank, one of the largest banks in Russia—all five of the major national television networks, as well as national radio networks, important national newspapers, and national news agencies. It also controls more than 60 percent of the country's estimated 45,000 regional and local newspapers and periodicals. State-run television is the main news source for most Russians and generally serves as a propaganda tool of the government, while the newspapers and radio stations with the largest audiences largely focus on entertainment content. The government also owns RT, an international, multilingual satellite news network, which generally seeks to promote the Kremlin's take on global events.

Media ownership diversity continued to decline in 2013, as companies loyal to the Kremlin and regional authorities purchased additional outlets, and most other media businesses remained dependent on state subsidies and government printing, distribution, and transmission facilities. In November, Gazprom Media bought the television and radio holdings of Profmedia from mining tycoon Vladimir Potanin.

Advertising revenue for Russian media outlets grew by an estimated 11.3 percent in 2013, though most of the growth was driven by the internet and television markets. Print outlets experienced falling circulation and higher production costs. Private businesses are reported to be reluctant to place advertisements in outlets that are not favorable to the government. There is a fast-growing pay-TV market in Russia, and the government is undertaking an ambitious conversion plan to bring digital television into every Russian home.

About 61 percent of Russians accessed the internet in 2013, though the rate was higher in the cities. Russians have joined social-networking sites in large numbers and are among the heaviest social-media users worldwide.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

81

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

32

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24